

Gospel: Matthew 17:14-23

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today's Gospel begins immediately after our Lord descends from Mount Tabor with His disciples, Peter, James, and John. At the base of the mountain, they encounter a multitude of people, one of whom comes to Christ and kneels down before Him, asking Him to heal his son who suffers as an epileptic, who often times falls into the fire and often times into the water.

The man then goes on to say that he brought his son to the disciples but they could not cure him. To this the Lord responds, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me." In saying this, the Lord upbraids the man, not only for his lack of faith, but also because he shifted the blame for his own lack of faith to the disciples.

When we think of the miracles of Christ, when He cured the sick, raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the mute, the ability to walk to the lame, how many times did we see our Lord ask for a display of faith before imparting healing? The answer is in almost every case. And this case is no different.

When we look at the account of today's healing in the Gospel of St. Mark, we see some more details, we see that the Lord did in fact challenge the faith of the man, saying, "If you can believe, all things are possible." And to this the man responded, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!"

This was an important moment in the development of the man's spiritual life, for he had come clean, he had revealed that while he believed, his faith was in fact very weak. And in doing so, he humbled himself and he placed himself, with all his own deficiencies, and the fate of his son, who suffered as St. Mark reveals since childhood, in the hands of the Lord.

If we think about it, how different was this man from the Apostle Peter, who in last week's Gospel, proclaimed, "Lord if it is You, let me come to You walking on the water" and then a moment later when he began to sink he cried, "Lord save me!"

Here is one of the sad and unfortunate truths of the spiritual life: We, as imperfect men and women, bear within ourselves a mixture of faith and doubt. At times our faith is strong, and then at other times it is weak. At times we walk on water and at times we sink.

Yet, the man in today's Gospel, having been chastised by the Lord, acknowledged both his faith and his unbelief. But he did more than acknowledge his unbelief, he did all that we can do when our faith is weak, he asked for the Lord's help – he asked for the Lord to strengthen his faith.

Faith is a gift of God. Often, when think of faith we think of doctrines and dogmas as revealed through the Church in Her Scriptures, Patristic writings, and Creed. But there is a second understanding of the word faith, and that is faith as trust – trust in the living God. This type of faith varies in us to greater or lesser degrees depending upon our closeness to God.

The man in today's Gospel was not a Baptized and Chrismated Orthodox Christian, he did not have the grace of God residing in his heart, but he did recognize that he was in the presence of the One from whom this grace flows – He was in the presence of Christ. And he cried out to the Lord, "I believe that you can heal my son! But I need you to grant assurance of this to my heart!"

The Apostle Peter when he began to sink after walking on the water had not yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. He had not yet been solidified in his trust in God. But after receiving the Spirit in the upper room, he not only never again wavered in his faith, but he exemplified the faith on which Christ said He would build His Church – that is the confession of and trust in Christ as the Son of God.

And so today's Gospel continues, telling of how the Lord rebuked the demon and it came out of the young man never to enter him again.

Then the disciples approached the Lord privately and asked Him why they could not cast our the demon. And the Lord gave them two reasons. First because of their lack of faith, but also because they were not strengthened by prayer and fasting.

We remember that when the disciples of John the Baptist came to the Lord and asked Him why they and the Pharisees fast often, but His disciples did not fast, the Lord replied, "Can the sons of the bridechamber mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then they shall fast." From this we can infer that while the disciples were with the Lord, they did not fast. But what does fasting have to do with casting out demons?

Weren't the disciples given power from the Lord Himself to cast out demons when He sent them out two by two with the charge, "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give!" But today, they encountered a demon they could not cast out. Was the demon's power greater than the power the disciples received from the Lord? Certainly not!

But the disciples needed to become more faithful instruments of the Lord's power through prayer and fasting. Spiritually they needed to rise to the occasion. The power to cast out the demon had already been given to them, but they were not prepared for the struggle of this exorcism.

There is of course a great lesson for us here.

When we seek to be freed from a particular passion, whether it be greed, gluttony, lust, pride, or whatever, we have to work with the grace of God which has been given to us in our baptism. We have to rise above the earthly desires which so often cast us first into the uncontrollable fires of sinful passions and then into the waters of dejection and despair. And we have to rise up by making our soul light through fasting and giving it wings through prayer. Did not the Prophet David also pray for these wings of virtue when he said, "Who will give me wings like a dove? And I will fly away, and be at rest."

And so brothers and sisters, the power to be freed from our passions has been given to us as disciples of Christ through baptism.

So, if our faith is weak, let us turn to the Lord like the man in today's Gospel and let us ask Him to strengthen our faith. Let us ask Him for assurance that He will cast out our passions from us once and for all like the demon in today's Gospel.

But let us also remember that we need to do our part. The Lord requires not only our faith, but He also requires our action. For if we do not rise up above the base desires of the earth on the wings of prayer and fasting, then we will never ascend to the heavenly kingdom where we can find eternal rest with Christ.

To Him be the glory together with His eternal Father and His Most-holy, Good, and Life-creating Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.